

A SIMPLE REVOLUTION

The Making of an Activist Poet

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RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS WITH MEN

In addition to our new women companions and sister revolutionaries, who were showing up sixty at a time to our meetings, Wendy and I belonged to a consciousness-raising group on Lexington Street that was half men. We joked about this, "How could you tell it was a *dyke* consciousness-raising group? Because it was half men." I had not spent more than two hours with a straight man since I left my father's house, and so was curious. What were straight men like? We lived with three men, Anne's husband J., M., who rented the tiny pantry bedroom, and S., who slept over at his girlfriend's house and just showed up for dinner and to work on the various cars he stored downstairs in the basement-garage.

We formed a group with the four of them, plus Gail and her man R. We talked a great deal about politics in general, but forced the discussions onto women's issues as often as possible. The men were very well-intentioned, loving guys, with plenty of problems of their own. They were actually quite tender-hearted, and genuinely wanted to learn about male supremacy. And they were starting from near zero.

"Oh, of course you can be a musician," S. and J. said scornfully to Wendy when she complained about women being excluded from the world of music. "Prove it," she replied, so they took her that night with her guitar, J.'s drumsticks, and S.'s saxophone, to a jam session. I waited up, so witnessed their drawn, pale faces when they marched in, single file, at 3 A.M. Wendy looked grimly vindicated, the others looked to be sadder and wiser men.

Thereafter S. said this: "Being a man is like being given a pile of money. And the catch is, you can only spend it on yourself. If you give it away to anyone else, you lose it."

This astute metaphor for male privilege could apply to white privilege as well. Racism and the Black Power movement were frequently discussed in our group, which was all white. S. was a huge fan of George Jackson's, and Angela Davis was our household heroine. We attended marches, rallies, speeches. Our group of four women and four men met weekly for the whole year of 1970. We grappled with such issues as why S. was refusing to use a condom, anti-lesbianism in R.'s family, men's resentment that, as S. put it, "a woman can just sell her ass."

Wendy finally said in exasperation, "Why don't you go out on the street and sell *your ass*?" On reflection, he dropped the subject.

GAY WOMEN'S LIBERATION: TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

When our Gay Women's Liberation group began, Wendy and I had been together for two years, time that to me blended into one long, lovely, playful, meaningful day. We had (from my point of view) great sex, interesting stuff to do, lively interactions. She was more beautiful to me every day, and I was beginning to understand her when she spoke her radical New Yorkese. She was barrels of fun, creative, and loving of literature. Even our arts were coming into focus, though she was still mostly taking photographs rather than drawing, and I still did not dare to call myself a real poet because I thought of the "Common Woman Poems" as an exercise. What we did not have was reflection about ourselves as individual people and as a couple, as lovers, reflection we immediately received in Gay Women's Liberation (or GWL as we had taken to calling it). First question: Do you have a girlfriend? Second question: How long have you been together? Third question: Where did you meet, how did you get together? Fourth question: How old were you when you came out? We began to see ourselves, as a couple, as lovers, as real to the world, real to someone else.

Eventually some lesbians would go so far as to define themselves as a separate "race" because their families of origin had cut the bonds entirely. Within our group, members' experiences ranged from women fleeing from family-enforced incarceration and "treatment" such as electric shock or lobotomy, to milder yet nevertheless devastating splits like one woman's mother urging her—despite the daughter's years of committed gay rights activism—to drop lesbianism and get married to a man. There was not yet a social understanding of "sexual orientation" as something beyond choice.

To our families we were still anomalies. As far as I knew, my father was still not speaking to me, though he and my mother had stood at the foot of my bed as I awakened from my coma. But I had not visited them since then, and was estranged from everyone else in my family. Initially to Wendy's mother I was "the creep from Albuquerque" that she advised her daughter to "lose." As women out in the world we also had no personal identities. To the men in Newsreel we were "the girls." To the men at the *Express Times* I was "the typesetter." To my

boss at work I was "the medical transcriptionist" (and somewhat suspect, as I had become surly).

To the Gay Women's Liberation women, Wendy and I were now respected as individuals, as persons, and also as a couple together, as lovers, the lovers, the stable model, the activists, the artists, the leaders—even in a movement that disclaimed leadership. "Lover" became a new title of distinction and connection. We were Lovers. This was a step into Outness from the old Washingtonian secrecy of the word "Friend," said with a slight emphasis. "This is my lover, Wendy." Across an ocean from "this is my Friend."

Wendy still did not claim the term "lesbian." "I am a woman who just happens to love Judy," she explained herself. Bisexuality was not a term of the day, not understood, not believed, and not tolerated. Our movement, like others, needed and demanded all or nothing, "the real thing." So in the Native movement some people dyed their skin to be dark enough to fit in, and in the black movement afros, formerly despised, now became the only way to wear one's hair. What had been only bad now became only good. In our movement dyke clothing and posturing were indications of the full commitment to dykeness that had become the acceptable, even glorified way to be, with little tolerance for variation.

So I would guess that at this time Wendy and others with her same openness, like Susan Griffin and alta, had to either surrender lesbian community or hide the part of themselves that loved, was lovers with, men. "I am a woman who happens to love women" was one definition of who we were. I did not think of myself as "a woman who happened to love women." I was a lesbian, a dyke, and a lifetime homosexual. It seems to me I was always gay, even in the womb, where my mother said "you kicked like a boy." For the first time I now had a license to be myself, and to be desirable as that self.

In 1970 I wrote a few stanzas in my poem "A History of Lesbianism" to encompass both positions, Wendy and me in the same poem, making up the term "women-loving-women" who "walked and wore their clothes / the way they liked / whenever they could." Some of us embraced the term "dyke" (dike, alternative spelling) while others thought it was a terrible, pejorative term. The poem continued, "in America we were called dykes / and some liked it / and

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some did not." Dyke is a good term because it refers to an individual and to her mannerisms and ways of being. A dyke is a dyke whether or not she is involved with lovers or a lover. Those of us from the old days, the bar culture days, tended to embrace this term; we had been called dyke by rough fellows, some of whom meant us harm, but we had also embraced the term as descriptive of our way of life. "I was a dyke by the time I was five" referred to, say, our fighting to wear pants and play sports. The poem ends with a feminist political statement: "the subject of lesbianism is very ordinary / it's the subject / of male domination / that makes / everybody / angry."

The line "in America we were called dykes" would be picked up and quoted, re-quoted, i.e., "In Amerikkka they call us dykes," for various purposes for decades afterwards. But in our 1970 GWL movement, those of us who had come out in earlier times or who felt we were "born that way" were called "bar dykes" or "old world dykes" by younger women who had another perspective, who thought that becoming a lesbian was a personal, and political, choice. The choice, they said, was to be free from male domination. Overnight, "dyke" had gone from the status of a Category 5 hurricane to the only possible site of rescue from harm. Our independent way of life was to be emulated, to be "chosen." The view from here was dizzying.

STANDING UP FOR OURSELVES AS DYKES

More and more varied women were coming to meetings, like Red Jordan Arobateau, a mixed race, working-class writer and artist with street smarts who immediately began teaching self-defense for women. Middle-class white women came, like Marny Hall, who would become a writer and lesbian therapist, and activists from the old left labor movement, Brenda Crider and Louise Merrill.

The weekly meetings swelled, and we began to plan actions to draw the attention of straight, leftist, feminist women. For instance a group of us stood in a long line at the front of a NOW meeting holding hands and announcing ourselves into what seemed shocked silence. Some of us made T-shirts that read "East Bay Dykes" in big letters, and wore them, as Pat Jackson said, "to the ice cream stores"—meaning the places mainstream Americans gather.

Straight feminist organizers Beth Oglesby and Laura X began attending our meetings, listening to our heated discussions as we criticized every institution and every theory of social progress, trying to define who we were. Anne Leonard remembers going to the Benvenue meetings,

[It was] a big room full of lesbian women, even though I didn't identify (yet) as a lesbian woman I was there; I remember the feeling the group had of wanting to be heard and recognized as a lesbian woman—straight women and also by the Left. There was a lot of different opinions, and a lot of feelings, why were we doing this and how were we going to do this....militant, very enthusiastic, very devoted, personal each person....it was very personal that they were doing this. Everyone was there for personal reasons but something bigger was being created. I had no idea about left politics, I came from a small town outside Philadelphia, and even though I lived in LA for a time it was only when I got to San Francisco that I was learning, I was listening very closely while pretending that I knew what was going on. Though of course I knew what it was all about because I could feel it inside.

If theories of social change excluded, defamed, or criminalized us lesbians, why should we accept their basic premises? We argued about relationships among straight women, to gay men, to the use of violent tactics, to feminism and socialism, to the radical left, to the psychiatric establishment. We discussed racism, including our own. We had no end of subjects. We organized our circles, a group of us attended a lecture by a well-known, thoroughly published psychiatrist, an "expert" in female homosexuality. From the audience, we questioned him, what was his authority based in? What real reasons did he have for pathologizing our lives? For emphasis, we stood scattered throughout the audience. There were at least a dozen of us, perhaps more. We didn't yell or shout, just stood. At our standing up, declaring our sanity to him, he grabbed his papers, and fled the room. We felt like Dorothy discovering the Wizard was behind a curtain of false authority.

In that year of 1970, a group of determined activist lesbians took seriously the idea that we were aanguard in behalf of all women, that we were a war-

ee. We wanted women's rights for herself. We wanted to end the streets to be safe places to be supported with love and creative thoughts to make women brought out in complete, revolution.

LOVING WOMEN—A READING

But this is a love story of women? And specifically loving women? What women loves? How do I love women? A movement that loves women? What if we had religion and sought their leaders? Handed out materials? "The Psychoanalysis of Edith Sitwell," and reprints from Radical Lesbian Feminist Brown had both published and handed them out too. Out on the West Coast, we things we handed out to start gathering materials that would change the ourselves. We began gathering, including our neighbors. Women's Liberation. We best collaborations, and no idea what we were doing would decide? I collected Lowell, Gertrude Stein,

Oglesby and Laura X began attending discussions as we criticized Congress, trying to define who we were in venue meetings,

women, even though I didn't identify here; I remember the feeling the group recognized as a lesbian woman—

the Left. There was a lot of difference why were we doing this and how were very enthusiastic, very devoted, very personal that they were doing the reasons but something bigger about left politics, I came from a small even though I lived in LA for a time Francisco that I was learning, I was finding that I knew what was going on.

It was all about because I could feel it was defamed, or criminalized basic premises? We argued about men, to gay men, to the use of violence the radical left, to the psychology including our own. We had no end of us attended a lecture by a well-known "expert" in female homosexuality what was his authority based in? What was our lives? For emphasis, we stood up. We were at least a dozen of us, perhaps more. At our standing up, declaring we had fled the room. We felt like Donny behind a curtain of false authority. Determined activist lesbians took seriously if all women, that we were a woman

made. We wanted women's bodies and sexualities liberated for each woman to exhibit for herself. We wanted battery and sexual assault against women to stop, we wanted the streets to be safe and pleasant for women to walk, we wanted mothers to be supported with childcare and in other ways; we wanted women's ideas and creative thoughts to be taken seriously. We wanted equality for all. We wanted women brought out of the Middle Ages. In short, we wanted a simple, incomplete, revolution.

WOMAN TO WOMAN—A REVOLUTIONARY ANTHOLOGY

But this is a love story of course. It asks the question "What does it mean to love women?" And specifically, what would it mean if men loved women—really loved women? What would that be like? If women loved women, and themselves? How do I love women, and then one single woman? If you make a social movement that loves women, what does that accomplish? What does it mean? What if we had religions that loved women? A culture that cherished women and sought their leadership?

I handed out materials at the meetings, my own articles, including the "The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke," my new article, "Lesbians as Bi-gaywomen," and reprints from *RAT Magazine*, a Left voice which had been used by Radical Lesbian Feminists in New York. Martha Shelley and Rita Brown had both published articles I thought were important, so I copied them and handed them out too.

Out on the West Coast, with so much activity and so many people avidly reading things we handed out at meetings, Wendy and I decided the time had come to start gathering material to do an anthology of women's poetry and graphics that would change the images and therefore the way women thought about themselves. We began gathering the materials from every source we could think of, including our neighbors, and of course women we were meeting through Women's Liberation. We were perfectly coordinated in this endeavor, one of our best collaborations, and one in which we were inordinately creative as we had no idea what we were doing. What on earth was "women's poetry"? Who would decide? I collected some poems, some by well-known authors (Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein), some by published feminist authors (Marge

Piercy, Marilyn Hacker, alra), and some by women we were meeting like our neighbors, people who heard we were doing such an outrageous project included my Common Woman poems. I gathered sixty pages of manuscript and handed it out to women, along with a form asking such questions as: Which poems affected you? Which do you consider poetry? What would you include in a collection? The answers surprised, some of the biggest "names" didn't make the cut; some of the least "poetic" had the biggest effect. In the end I chose for impact, positive and negative. Most liked my poems, though responded "Common as a telephone directory...this is not poetry." I included them anyhow, as they were spreading around town; I would find pages posted on people's refrigerators in the new households consisting mostly of women.

Wendy's friend Vicky Jacobs showed up one day and pulled out some cash for us to buy paper so we could print our book. Then Naomi and Pat Jacobs came over with money that Gay Women's Liberation had gathered for us to buy a mimeograph machine, an office copy machine that used ink; you typed the text on a limp, blue, waxy sort of template and then draped it over a rotating barrel. The ink squeezed through the letters and printed on the front blank pages. They had bought the machine from Diane DiPrima, who had been in the Bay Area poetry scene for years. I was including one of Diane's poems in the anthology, though not necessarily with her permission. I was grabbing poetry from everywhere, taking the author's name off, going for pure content and breaking down the elitism that I felt—despite the heroic efforts of the Bay poets—still dominated poetry.

The physical design of the book was inside out: we used heavy paper for the text, thin paper for the cover, and onionskin paper for the graphics. A dyslexic design sense on my part. I was certain that the ink on one side would leak through to the other, so insisted on backing each graphic with a blank sheet of the heavy, lavender-tinted paper. The cover, delicate as an aged leaf, was red and carried a powerful graphic by Wendy and big letters for the title: *Woman Woman*.

The boldness of the book described us as well. Our erotic connection was fueled by how competitive we were toward each other. When we struggled it became physical, not in any violent sense, just in the juggling we did for territory.

— sex negotiations
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— MC PARKER

One day shortly after

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were meeting daily, our constant negotiations; who would run the mimeograph machine? We crowded shoulders and hips together to jockey for positions. Laughing, while knowing the seriousness of our personal quests for self-authorization, as well as our women's voices in the world. We wrestled heedlessly, testing and finding our strengths, exhilarated at the pitch and heave of our equality. Members of GWL came over to help us collate, so this became "our book," a collective enterprise. And the book, filled with women's art and poetic opinions, got printed, and was both strong and beautiful, if flawed in its design.

MEETING PARKER

One day shortly after we started this project, probably March or April of 1970, Linda Wilson stepped gracefully through the bright paisley cloth that draped the fine arch into my room. "I've brought someone to meet you," she said in her resonant voice, and in walked a tall black woman, neatly dressed in pressed slacks and blouse, high cheekbones, thick glasses, and handsome in her own striking way. Here was Pat Parker. Pat was gregarious, athletic like Linda and Wendy, while at the same time her thick glasses and high forehead gave her the intellectual look of an introvert, a book-reader or librarian. She emanated a wave of warmth, charming, like a lot of Southerners.

"I hear your drink is Southern Comfort," she said, handing me a brown bag with a pint bottle of amber liquid in it. Linda excused herself, Parker sat down (by now I had a couple of chairs) and, sipping the bitingly sweet liquor, we began talking about cowboy clothes, poetry, activism, Civil Rights, where we grew up, how we were with regard to feminism, the need for revolution, the bad deeds of the power structure, and by the time the bottle was empty we were connected.

I showed her the rows of pages Wendy had meticulously lined along the floorboards of my room, spilling into the room next to it. Pat promised to bring me some of her work.

I included four of Pat's feminist poems in *Woman to Woman*, which was ready for distribution in late summer of 1970. "Child of Myself" is a signature Pat Parker poem ending "I, Woman must be—the child of myself." Pat was writing black woman identity, black activist political, and feminist poems.

She was not yet writing anything pro-lesbian, though she had begun a relationship with a woman.

Pat had been reading her antiracist and feminist poems through the second half of the sixties, in places like the Black Cat and other North Beach bars she read with her second husband, a white poet named Bob Parker, as well as with Alta and Alta's poet-man, John Oliver Simon, and after divorcing Parker, Pat kept his last name, dropping her father's name, "Cooks." Even in our movement called her "Parker," at her request. In 1968 she was reading a lot with another Berkeley white man poet, Charlie Potts. She and Charlie were lovers, according to Simon's memory, during the summer of 1968. By time Linda Wilson brought her to meet me in spring of 1970, Pat had one woman lover; in January of that year she had turned twenty-six, and had also led a life full of black female landmines.

In 1970 there were of course no public venues for reading lesbian poetry (or doing anything else) to all women's audiences yet. In that year, Parker and I read together in an upstairs room of the Addison Street lesbian house in Berkeley, to a small though intensely attentive audience of militant dykes and friends. We both drank our way through this reading, yet in the energy at moment stayed fairly focused. I read by candlelight, the golden glow giving a numinous cast to the faces surrounding and supporting us.

I took my shirt off at one point to display the nakedness one needs to tell new truths and then I set fire to my poems, in memory of Sappho and the historic burning of her work. That reading, in which I read virtually every poem I had written in my life, remains in my memory a liminal moment, sealing a partnership between Parker and me, a ritual that felt like setting lesbian poetry into a path of social change that would include us. Although Parker was not yet reading pro-lesbian poems, in her style she was definitely out as a dyke, and feminist poetry was an exhilarating confirmation of women's solidarity, and anti-racist poems set our movement on an appropriate moral course.

Over the next two decades our friendship was close, very close at times, then further away, then close again. We never had a sexual connection, even a flirtation. We both had rangey voices—a singing teacher once told me I covered five, somewhat quavery, octaves—and Pat's was at least as big a space

as mine, with deep resonant tones and so on. I sang more expressively; I had a baritone and I read slowly and clearly so that it put her at ease, and I've since changed. Her nickname would have been "the Goddess" in a divine manner and was given to her by her lovers, Anna and Carol. On a seasonal matter, "she always changes," she would say. "No man can keep up with her."

Trip to the East Coast

In the Fall of 1970, Anna and Carol and I traveled to England Free Press, that is, to London. At the same time, Carol and I planned an epic cross-country road trip that would take us as far as Chicago, where Leonard and Shirley were staying across the Bay Bridge. We took a van along with several cars and drove along the highway to the Terrace Street Inn in San Francisco, where we could stay. The van in the driveway was seen a woman repair a car, and we took Carol, and how just right. But Carol was a sitter, and she got into the van and a

The women of the radical group had no accommodations, but they had only our red copies of the paper as a source of cash. Seeing that we had barely bought wine. We

with deep resonant tones and some good top notes. Of the two of us, she read much more expressively; I had adopted a flat form so as not to manipulate the audience, and I read slowly and deliberately—one reviewer described it as bell-like, another that it put her into alpha rhythm—but it sounds really dull to my ears now, and I've since changed how I read. Pat was more graceful and in the moment. Her nickname would come to be “the Preacher.” Pat, offstage, had an easy, expansive manner and was persistently patient in reaching across to people. As one of her lovers, Ann Bernard, put it, to Parker breaking through prejudice was a personal matter, “she thought that if everyone got to know one another, things would change.” No matter who you were she was willing to reach across to you.

THE TRIP TO THE EAST COAST

In the Fall of 1970, Anne Leonard and I responded to a notice from the New England Free Press, that they had internships for people wanting to learn printing. At the same time, Carol Wilson, Pat Jackson, and Naomi Groeschel had planned an epic cross-country trip distributing women’s literature. They would drive us as far as Chicago and we would catch another ride to Boston. Big Anne Leonard and skinny me packed what little warm clothing we owned and came across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco to Oakland, sleeping on the floor along with several other women refugees of the movement, in the sprawling Terrace Street living room while Carol worked on repairing the van that would carry us.

The van in the driveway was a rare luxury for women to have. We had never seen a woman repair a car before. We were quite impatient about how long it took Carol, and how jealously she guarded her skills, allowing no one else to help. But Carol was a skilled mechanic. So, after three days of waiting, we bundled into the van and a number of us set out on the adventure.

The women of the radical New England Free Press were happy to see us but had no accommodations, and we had naively forgotten to ask about this. We had only our red copies of *Woman to Woman*, which we sold for a dollar, our only source of cash. Seeing that we were homeless in this already chilly city, I immediately bought wine. We walked around in a dazed condition, going to

parties at night to keep warm, dragging a bottle of the anesthetizing red liquid everywhere, trying to figure out what to do. I'm sure we were allowed to sleep a couple of nights at the press, but the members made it clear this was a serious violation that could get everyone in trouble.

This semi-homeless situation went on for a few miserable days and then Beth Oglesby, who had moved to Boston recently with her three children, held a party for us. Specifically it was a poetry reading, and I read my heart out. When Beth announced that we had nowhere to live, two lesbians immediately volunteered to give us a bed in their place. They were both cabbies who lived in Roxbury; one of them was named Peaches. They were barely making a living. Their apartment had no heat, and they generously turned their bedroom, which had a barely functional space heater, over to us. I wish I could say that we valiantly refused and took the icy living room, but we didn't. We huddled in our California skins, sleeping in our clothes.

By now it was genuinely freezing at night, and as the weeks went on, we were perpetually shivering and hungry, living on doughnuts and wine; a tuna salad sandwich was a luxury. At the press, it's a wonder we learned anything. We must have been disheveled, stinking, wine-breathing, hippie-seeming, and off-putting to these buttoned-up, put together, mostly middle-class Marxist Boston radicals.

We did learn to print however, for which I am grateful; I also got my first glimpse of the FBI, tall tan raincoats who came to the press door and were admirably scolded by one of the women. "I won't say anything to you; it's within my rights to keep silent." I also noticed that many of the press pamphlets were dense intricate internal arguments of fine points about the proletariat. I could not understand them, even though I had passed courses in sociology, and had read some of Marx and Engels. Yet for all their obscurity, the pamphlets were priced low, at thirty-five cents, so the working class could afford them. But I wondered, who could read them? And renewed my vow to remain as accessible in my work as possible.

Some time in mid-November Beth invited me to her large, comfortable house on some pretext; I eagerly agreed to go, feeling horribly guilty at so readily abandoning my traveling buddy Anne and the two poor cabbies for a hot meal,

shower, and some personal attention. And, it turned out, a warm night in bed with Beth, who recently told me that I brought her out that night.

Bringing people out was not my specialty, though I heard some movement people excelled at this. I had a very difficult time with casual sex, not trusting strangers with my overly sensitive body. Beth was easy to be with, not demanding emotional commitment, and not distanced either, but invitation. I recall her surprise, "Oh! You have a *hard* body." Until the lesbian movement made them radical chic, muscles had been gendered, and also part of class structure. Now they could belong on any body, and happily on mine!

Just prior to Thanksgiving the white van showed up in Boston with Carol and Pat, radiant from their trip distributing women's literature, mostly alta's publications from her Shameless Hussy Press and our red-covered lavender-colored anthology *Woman to Woman*. We all went out to a bar, and on the way back to where we were staying we found a woman huddled on the street who had she had been beaten and raped by a taxi driver. I would describe this scene in my poem "A Woman Is Talking to Death" three years later: "My friends and I left the bar / we found a woman lying in the snow / by the side of the road / her feet had turned the snow pink...." Pat remembers this incident, and that I covered the woman with my peacoat until the ambulance arrived.

On their historic trip Pat, Naomi, and Carol had covered a lot of territory. In Philadelphia they invited a black activist lesbian named Pat Norman to come home with them. Naomi told me they attended an important meeting in New York, which marked the founding of The Feminist Press, an independent publishing company run by Florence Howe. Pat Jackson remembers what their road tour was like: "In each city we connected with women...we met women in Lansing, Michigan, who had formed an Anti-Rape, Horseback Patrol. We met with Robin Morgan, who wrote *Sisterhood is Powerful*, met Rita Mae Brown who later wrote many lesbian novels. In New York we attended meetings of women trying to form a women's party. In New Haven, we attended the trials of Black Panthers Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seal. That November, we ended up in Washington, DC to witness the historic Black Panther Party conference, the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC)."

**BLACK PANTHER PARTY REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION
NOVEMBER 27-29, 1970**

The Panther conference was indeed historic, an expansive attempt to unite in dialogue and common purpose the various movements that had poured out of the Sixties. Lucy Newton had reached out to both the women's and the gay movements, declaring both to be oppressed groups. Anne and I rode down from Boston to Washington in the van, and met up with other lesbians from the West Coast Gay Women's Liberation. They had arrived with a fresh supply of *Woman to Woman*, which we easily hawked to the mob of radical women who showed up for the conference. Negotiations between the Washington chapter of the BPP and Howard University over use of buildings broke down, though another space was used to house about five hundred of us radical women. We spread sleeping bags, quilts and jackets on the floor. Anne Leonard and I stayed there, wrapped in our dark multi-purpose peacoats.

The Black Panther Constitutional Convention was an ambitious and idealistic meeting that intended to draw together common interests toward a single revolutionary goal, as the Panthers attempted to expand their base by calling themselves the "vanguard" of a broad movement. Newspapers reported that somewhere between three thousand and five thousand young people, mostly white, arrived in the capital city for the convention, having learned about the open invitation through the alternative left media including the widely distributed Black Panther paper. The newly formed Washington, DC, BPP had struggled all summer to find a hall large enough to hold everyone at once with large workshop rooms so that issues could be addressed and the fledgling People's Constitution could be framed. Because of the violent rhetoric espoused by the party, including the phrase "Off the pigs!" and the Maoist war cry, "Power comes from the barrel of a gun," Washington's middle class did not trust them.

At the last moment, Howard University agreed to host the Convention but only with a \$10,000 advance payment. The Panthers were not organized to raise that amount of money. Lacking a place to gather, the Convention failed in its constitution discussions. Panther leaders delivered some speeches in smaller venues, but feminists objected to misogynist phrases, while Gay Liberation groups found homophobia in some of the rhetoric. Newton's invitations to both

the party
Local churches organized hundreds of feminist solidarity for women each other. Women made the new voice of lesbians articulating.

In retrospect the separate groups were much too
extremely diverse
multi-structure: the different needs for
white feminists.

Panthers of both genders and worked hard but been shredded sexually and afterwards became writing black men, leaving fathers and many."

Panther women children, running successful people. Black power communities, themselves and on one side. The shoot-outs that resulted helped black communities. And looked the other way, and assassinated

groups, each highly sensitive to language, was ahead of the reality of attitudes within the party.

Local churches opened their doors to shelter the attendees, and the fact that hundreds of feminists were housed in one huge hall provided a priceless opportunity for women from all over the country to make passionate speeches to each other. Women spoke up from a variety of positions—socialist, feminist, and the new voice of lesbian militancy, which our California group was especially vocal in articulating.

In retrospect the inability of the BPP to find space large enough to hold the disparate groups reflected the range of contradictory situations we were all in; this was much too soon for people to comprehend, let alone resolve each other's extremely diverse group needs. For example, just to take one issue, that of family structure: the people attending the conference had (at least) three very different needs from family that fell along the lines of African Americans, straight white feminists, and Lesbians and Gays.

Panthers of both sexes wanted to raise the status of manhood for black men, and worked hard for the solidification and security of black families that had been shredded since the deliberate divisions imposed on them during slavery and afterwards. Elaine Brown, who ultimately chaired the Black Panther Party, would write decades later in *A Taste of Power* of her efforts and motives for pushing black men to the forefront: "I had heard of black men—men who were loving fathers and caring husbands and strong protectors. I had not really known any."

Panther women in particular were addressing the needs of distressed children, running successful breakfast programs and educational programs for young people. Black people wanted police brutality and harassment, routine in their communities, to cease, and toward this end the party men had armed themselves and on certain occasions had fought back against the police in gun battles. The shoot-outs, killings, infiltrations, set-ups, arrests, and high-profile trials that resulted helped to publicize the behavior of police within and against black communities. And also helped to frighten mainstream white Americans, who looked the other way as the FBI, in conjunction with local police, harassed, hunted, and assassinated male BPP leaders. FBI head J. Edgar Hoover had

been explicit in his orders that Panther leaders be taken down through false imprisonment and other methods, regardless of evidence.

In contrast, white feminists for the most part had encountered police clubs slamming heads only at demonstrations, not in their neighborhoods. Men and boys in white families were not gunned down on the street by officers in blue. White heterosexual women were critiquing their family system as a feudal institution in which the women had for many generations lost control of their bodies, and had as a primary or sole function supported a husband by taking a back seat, and providing him with heirs, preferably sons. While black men wanted the social support to head families, and to enable black women to stay home as wives and mothers, white feminists wanted to end the male-headed family structure. In order to produce the equal relationship they wanted, these women needed to separate, at least psychically, and more often physically, from the white men/husbands who had been raised to function as authoritarian heads of the family, and of every other institution. White women wanted control of their own bodies, and to gain economic and social independence, and they needed men who could change enough to become equal partners with them, as companions in life and in childrearing. These women were taking their families apart to reconstruct them.

Coming from yet a different perspective, many gay people of whatever gender were deeply estranged from, and sometimes in danger from their families of origin, needing to find a positive cultural group and individual safety first, a base from which to fight for basic human rights to live and love, rather than categorized as criminal, sinful, uselessly decadent, or mentally ill. Gay people were forming chosen community relationships that would protect them if necessary from their families of origin, and working for changes in social attitudes and practices that would allow their participation in society as themselves, and enable their families to understand them. Gay and lesbian people were looking for any kind of family structure that would work for them.

When I think of these examples of just one aspect of life—family—I understand why such a new constitutional convention could not go anywhere, and why so often everyone seemed to speak at cross purposes. The Panther ideal of weaving together the intersecting strands of the same revolutionary, Marxist

movement, had bumped into each other. There was no single movement, overlapping, sometimes competing, but yet, in my experience, power relations and varied factors impacted us selectively, and

Coletta Reid was one of those who illustrated the general situation.

There was a big Leftist movement in Cambodia, which was supported by Nixon. Women from the US brought a radical political perspective to women money for the revolution. They tried to distribute it among all, of being bourgeois, but Nixon wouldn't let the women get it out, said things like "Women are good," as though they were good.

Coletta understood from her classes; she was never Leftist. She was one of the few Leftist women in the DC area. Most of the Leftist women were communists, during which women openly supported each other. Women thinking about their place in society was a million times more important than men. She had been studying philosophy. She had been reading Marx. Men don't give women's issues much attention, given that women have been fighting for them.

Yet many men in my generation, women's liberation movement, were Communists. I met many in New Haven for Eldridge Cleaver and "Free Eldridge!" and still do.

movement, had bumped into the contradictory histories and needs among us. There was no single movement. We were all fighting very different, sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory, revolutions. These movements were not yet, in my experience, about "identity." They were about trying to change power relations and varied forms of oppression that contradicted each other and impacted us selectively, and differently.

Coletta Reid was one of the East Coast radicals who was very impressed by the militancy and presence of the West Coast Lesbians. Reid told me a story that illustrates the general attitude of white leftist men at the time.

There was a big Left organized demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia, which was announced in the spring of 1970 by Richard Nixon. Women from the Chicago 7 conspiracy trial came to DC, and brought a radical political consciousness. One leftist woman gave the women money for ten thousand free copies of *Off Our Backs*—but when they tried to distribute them at the demo the leftist men accused them of being bourgeois, suffragettes. At the demo, men tore the papers up, wouldn't let the women who were attached to them hand the papers out, said things like, "all you need is a good fuck, you women got it good," as though the women were simply being cranky.

Coletta understood from this experience that gender issues cut across all classes; she was never Left-identified after this. That summer, feminist and leftist women in the DC area began edging toward lesbianism. The Chicago 7 trial women were communal, so they held an *Off Our Backs* ten-day commune during which women opened themselves up to sexual feelings toward each other. Women thinking about their own condition and trying to change that was a million times more interesting than graduate school, where Coletta had been studying philosophy. She had a shift in consciousness, a realization "that men don't give women's issues any value." As indeed, how could they have been aware, given that women hadn't yet fully absorbed our issues ourselves?

Yet many men in my generation never did figure this out. Initially for white men, women's liberation meant "free sex." Max Dashu remembers attending a rally in New Haven for Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale, where "Free Ericka!" and "Free Eldridge!" and similar slogans were being called out. Disgusted with

the vacuity of school life at Harvard/Radcliffe, to which she had a scholarship. Max had been attending some feminist consciousness-raising meetings. I stood up and yelled, "Free women!"

The guy with the gramophone looked at her for a moment of political silence, then announced the new chant, "Free Pussy!" At that moment Max and I left just as Coletta had, having seen the enormous divide, the grand gap of incomprehension. However much women wanted and needed social change, men were not going to be the vanguard for us or with us. We would need to be our own vanguard.

BACK HOME TO A PRINTING PRESS

I arrived home in December in good news. Wendy and a few women who wanted to help us form a press had met with Ruth Gotstein, a representative from Glide Memorial Church. Ruth, who would five years later found Volcano Press, had handed them a \$500 grant to reprint *Woman to Woman*. With this they had immediately bought the biggest printing press they could find, an old Chief 22 that was going to give us a lot of excitement, much grief, some big accidents, and several invaluable books.

Black painted, iron standing upright nearly as tall as we were, with a set of wide, impressive rollers, it could print a sheet that was 22 by 17, meaning eight pages, four on each side of the sheet, a great improvement for our shop. Probably that garrulous old machine had eaten the good hands of several printers, but we didn't know that. We didn't know anything. And no one was going to teach us. Only one guy in town knew how to run the Chief. We called him, he trucked his toolbox down the steps to our basement sanctuary, and looked at us seven eager-faced young women, pointed to one and said he would fix the press up if she would sleep with him. We ran him out, and began to take the machine apart to see how it worked.

At the opening of 1971, while this little collective struggled to learn how to use our newly acquired press, I was trying to figure out how to get out of medical work that had been my primary way of earning a living for a decade. I craved economic independence that would feed my art, thought long and hard about how this might come about. If I didn't need to buy work uniforms, have bus fare and lunch money, get my hair cut and look neat and clean, I wouldn't

much money. The ease with which we had sold *Woman to Woman* from hand to hand tickled my mind with another idea: why not put my own poetry into a book and sell it? Wendy was willing to supply her artwork as illustrations, including the portraits we had used in the *Common Woman* chapbook. Gay Women's Liberation was peopled with many graphics artists, so a young woman named Sunny sketched a portrait of me as "Edward" in the dyke hat I wore to an increasing number of highly political, all-women's poetry readings. I was learning to see books as artful products, as crafted objects. With the line drawing in mind, I chose a blue cover, tan page paper, and thin magenta paper for the illustrations.

I thought long and hard about the title of my first book. I had already made the decision to be public about being gay/lesbian—the decision to come out in a public and theatrical manner, to use the terms that were "underground," the words that dare not be said, the "bad" words. If people could not say "lesbian" then I would say "dyke" and that would make "lesbian" safer to say because the border of appropriate speech had been moved further out. So I chose the title *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems*. I thought it was ugly, which made me sad; yet I understood its necessary reach for power, the power to change habits and minds. I didn't like it, but I respected it. Sunny, not out to her family, painted the tail of the "y" out so it read "Edward the Duke" and proudly sent it home as an example of her artistic success.

I was nothing if not colorful in my design choices, and my poetry reading clothing was not far behind—I loved mixing various kinds of stripes and wearing a textured vest along with two or three shirts for a layered look. Goodbye horrible, badly-made, tacky women's clothing! Goodbye single-color work uniforms with no individual flair! Nor was I constrained to some version of "men's clothing." By prowling through the secondhand stores, often with Wendy or Anne Leonard, who both had great clothing design sense, I came up with outfits that suited my inner sense of self—paradoxical, going in more than one direction at once, layered and mysterious, unafraid of mixing colors, fearlessly placing a Levi's jacket with sheepskin lining over a velvet green vest over a vertical striped shirt or two over a turtleneck with broad horizontal sailor stripes.

No dull blue socialist workshirts for me! Up on that stage I wanted women

to see possibility. And desirability. As the same. I wanted colorful striped turtlenecks and post-buttoned cowboy shirts; I wanted intricate plaid flannel shirts, pullover sweaters, and jackets that would keep me warm, warm, warm our chilly appetites. Because of the hippie movement and the now-burgeoning gay movement, the city was stuffed with great clothing, and it was cheap, cheap, cheap. A quarter could get you a gorgeous shirt, a dollar some hip-fitting pants that showed off your ass yet let you stride freely. Now I had style. Soon I was dressing like this a lot, wearing my soft-brimmed "dyke" hat that everyone loved and which I thought of as a poet's hat. I felt good about myself. And onstage my voice was coming in, "Bell-like."

Early in 1971 Wendy brought two more people home to live with us. She had met Helle on the street, and learned she was a recently arrived immigrant with no saleable skills except her body, so was hooking on the streets of the Tenderloin area of San Francisco to support herself and her four-year-old daughter. Short and stocky with straight blonde hair and blue eyes, from one of the northern European states, Lithuania or Estonia, Helle would do anything for the sake of her daughter. They sat together on the floor with Helle's hand falling onto Masika's curly brown locks, the delicate child's sea-grey eyes following the movements of Helle's pen on paper, teaching her to draw. I immediately turned my priceless front room over to them, where my hands-on door now held court in the arched doorway. In a few days of concentrated carpentry, I had made a tall wooden door out of three slabs of hatchet wood. Wendy and I had brought home from the docks on one of our scavenger missions. I covered it with eucalyptus nuts and Wendy arrived with a handful of brass fittings to hold it together.

Now, with mother and daughter installed in the room, I missed my bed but could not begrudge its sweet new use. Wendy and I began sleeping on a couch in the hallway, and then when the lack of privacy drove us crazy we put down a mattress in a corner of the basement, avoiding the worst mess of ever-churning car collection, which now filled most of the space.

We were careful not to ask questions about his business, knowing that he prowled out in the city for pink slips to match the cars and make them saleable. We were learning to live on a "need to know" basis, asking few questions.

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keeping our observations between us. So when he disappeared into the bathroom of an evening and came back to the kitchen table with his head drooping and eyes closed, we said nothing. For musicians especially, heroin lubricated the emotional channels, or so we believed, just as we believed that poets must drink lots of wine, artists must smoke opium, and that Van Gogh had cut his own ear off after being driven mad by the mistral wind of southern France. We were part of a very romantic era, full of excesses, artful with lively, nihilistic optimism and brilliance. We believed in beauty, theatrics, love, breaking rules, using art to whip up winds of rebellion.

While we lived in the uncomfortable basement, breathing air leaden with car exhaust and oil pans, I wrote a poem reclaiming Marilyn Monroe's body "for the sake of my own," a poem celebrating menstruation, and "A History of Lesbianism."

We had one dedicated straight woman in our early collective, and she gave our press its first home. Gail was tall and grounded, sure of what needed to be done, exactly what one would want to see in the mother of small children. Her role model of an adventurous female in her family had been her favorite aunt, who was a roller derby queen back in the day. Gail had rented a storefront on Valencia, which was right around the corner from our flat; she had made an apartment out of the back rooms, ignoring the papered-over front display windows. She had a huge, if damp, basement and offered it to us for our press. The mimeograph machine came out of our kitchen and found a place of its own in the front end of Gail's basement, on a long table where I could also stack the finished books. We were collecting other book-making tools as well—the long stapler Wendy and I had used to bind *Woman to Woman*, and a cutting board so we could trim the books and make them look more professional. I began to take great pleasure in solving the interesting problems of how to edit, design, typeset, lay out, and manufacture them.

Carol Wilson came down to our basement one day to make a jig, that woodworker's term for setting an action up to be repeatable; in this case she nailed a straight-edge to the table so I could slap one end of the cover against it and fold each cover perfectly with crisp blue edges. That month, February or March of 1971, as I completed production of two thousand copies of *Edward*

The Dyke and Other Poems on the little mimeograph machine, while other press collective women worked across the room on the big stubborn Chief, we had a visitor from the East Coast—Coleita Reid. She was immediately excited by the blue stacks of copies of *Edward the Dyke* and asked to take some with her.

"They aren't finished," I said, "they need to be cut in half." (I had cleverly printed them two at a time, on what was called "legal-sized" pages—11 x 17.)

"I want them anyway," she insisted, picking one up to take with her. "The world needs to read these."

I had never met a woman so rudely determined. I grabbed the other side of the blue double book. "No, you aren't."

"Yes I am. I am taking quite a few of them."

I knew how to be stubborn. Didn't I? We tugged and argued for quite a while, and to my shock she held out the longest. She took a stack, a whole box of my unfinished books. This was not the last I would see of Coleita Reid, already one of the leaders of the East Coast women's movement, and a member of the Furies collective.

Through the first six months of 1971 Wendy and I worked every day possible at the press. Icicle suggested we print one of my poems, "The Elephant Poem," as a coloring book, which she had designed with wonderful, fun illustrations, for Masika. So that was our first collectively manufactured book as a press "collective."

The year before, I had written an article, "Lesbians as Boneywomen" which was published twice that summer, once unsigned in an issue of *It Ain't Me Babe* that Alice was helping to edit. That the article wasn't signed in the local paper is a measure of how influenced we still were by the Maoist cultural revolution in China, which held that individuality was a counter-revolutionary attitude. We hadn't yet absorbed the feminist idea that "anonymous" was a woman and that continuing the habit would simply continue the disappearance of women's impact on the world. "Lesbians as Boneywomen" called for an end to categorizing people by sexual preferences, and can be summarized with its final line: "Lesbianism isn't something you are...it's something you do...Specifically, it's love you give somebody who happens, also, to be female."